

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-07 H-03 INR-10 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-10 PA-04 RSC-01 PRS-01 SPC-03 SS-20

USIA-15 SAM-01 AID-20 COME-00 EB-11 FRB-02 TRSE-00

XMB-07 OPIC-12 CIEP-02 LAB-06 SIL-01 OMB-01 NIC-01

DRC-01 /168 W

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R 082017Z FEB 74

FM AMEMBASSY LONDON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7852

INFO AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS

AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN

AMEMBASSY DUBLIN

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, UK

SUBJECT: BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION: OPENING SALVOS

1. SUMMARY: IN KICKOFF TO WHAT IS GENERALLY EXPECTED
TO BE A BITTER, HARDFOUGHT, AND CLOSE RUN CAMPAIGN,
LEADERS OF THREE MAJOR PARTIES SET OUT PRELIMINARY
ELECTION THEMES. PRIME MINISTER HEATH APPEALED FOR
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MANDATE TO CARRY THROUGH POLICIES NECESSARY TO CONTAIN

INFLATION AT HOME AND COPE WITH ECONOMIC PROBLEMS CAUSED BY CONDITIONS ABROAD. HE CALLED ON MODERATE AND REASONABLE PEOPLE TO STAND UP TO EXTREMISTS AND ASKED FOR THEIR VOTES AS EVIDENCE OF THEIR APPROVAL OF THE GOVERNMENT'S FIRM AND FAIR HANDLING OF THE MINERS' DISPUTE. OPPOSITION LEADER WILSON ACCUSED THE GOVERNMENT OF GROSS ECONOMIC MISMANAGEMENT AND SOCIAL INJUSTICE AND LAID THE BLAME FOR BRITAIN'S INDUSTRIAL STRIFE ON THE PM'S OBDURACY. LIBERAL LEADER THORPE SAID HIS PARTY ALONE WAS NOT BEHOLDEN TO EITHER MANAGEMENT OR LABOR, AND ARGUED THAT AN INCREASED REPRESENTATION OF LIBERALS IN PARLIAMENT WOULD HELP SAFEGUARD AGAINST EXTREMISM IN EITHER OF THE TWO MAJOR PARTIES. END SUMMARY

2. BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN GOT OFF TO FAST START ALMOST IMMEDIATELY AFTER PRIME MINISTER'S ANNOUNCEMENT ON FEBRUARY 7. FOLLOWING A BOISTEROUS COMMONS SESSION WHICH BEGAN WINDING UP ESSENTIAL LEGISLATIVE BUSINESS IN PREPARATION FOR THE ELECTION, PM HEATH APPEARED ON TV TO STATE HIS REASONS FOR CALLING ELECTION:

- THE ISSUE BEFORE COUNTRY IS SIMPLE ONE: COUNTRY FACES GRAVE PROBLEMS AT HOME AND ABROAD. "DO YOU WANT A STRONG GOVERNMENT WHICH HAS CLEAR AUTHORITY FOR FUTURE TO TAKE DECISIONS WHICH WILL BE NEEDED? DO YOU WANT PARLIAMENT TO FIGHT STRENUOUSLY AGAINST INFLATION? OR DO YOU WANT THEM TO ABANDON STRUGGLE AGAINST RISING PRICES UNDER PRESSURE FROM ONE PARTICULAR GROUP OF POWERFUL WORKERS?"

- PRICE RISES, PARTICULARLY OIL, BUT ALSO FOOD, ARE RESULT OF BIG CHANGES IN WORLD OUTSIDE.

- BRITAIN'S OWN ENERGY SITUATION IS NOT GLOOMY IN MID-TERM AND IF PROBLEMS ARE TACKLED "TOGETHER" THERE IS A BRIGHT FUTURE.

- GOVERNMENT HAD HANDLED MINERS' DEMANDS WITH FAIRNESS AND GREAT RESTRAINT. MINERS REFUSED TO DISCUSS GOVERNMENT PROPOSALS. THEREFORE ARRANGEMENTS ARE BEING MADE TO SET UP MACHINERY UNDER PAY BOARD TO EXAMINE MINERS' CASE IN ACCORDANCE WITH PRINCIPLES LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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OF RELATIVITIES REPORT. GOVERNMENT WILL UNDERTAKE THAT, WHATEVER RECOMMENDATIONS ARE MADE, THEY WILL BE BACKDATED TO MARCH 1. MINeworkERS HAVE BEEN ASKED TO CALL OFF STRIKE DURING CAMPAIGN.

3. PM THEN WENT ON TO APPEAL TO VOTERS FOR THEIR TRUST, TO WARN OF DIRE ALTERNATIVES, AND TO ADD AN ACCUSATION THAT DURING MINERS' DISPUTE POLITICAL EXTREMISTS HAVE

"MADE IT CLEAR THAT WHAT THEY WANT TO DO IS BRING DOWN THE ELECTED GOVERNMENT -- NOT JUST THIS GOVERNMENT BUT ANY GOVERNMENT." HE ENDED ON NOTE THAT TIME OF STRIFE MUST STOP, THAT THE VOICES OF MODERATE AND REASONABLE PEOPLE MUST NOW BE HEARD.

4. HAROLD WILSON'S FORMAL RESPONSE TO HEATH'S MINISTERIAL BROADCAST WILL NOT BE DELIVERED UNTIL TONIGHT (FEBRUARY 8), BUT IN TV INTERVIEW LAST NIGHT HE ADUMBRATED SOME OF LABOR'S MAJOR ARGUMENTS. HE CHARGED THE GOVERNMENT WITH GROSS ECONOMIC MISMANAGEMENT, AND SAID THAT SERIOUS INFLATION, BALANCE OF PAYMENTS DEFICITS, HIGH INTEREST RATES AND OTHER SIGNS OF ECONOMIC MALAISE HAD ALL BEEN EVIDENT BEFORE THE RISE IN OIL PRICES OR THE MINERS' DISPUTE. HE ACCUSED

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HEATH OF DELIBERATELY PRECIPITATING A SHOWDOWN WITH THE MINERS SO THAT HE COULD DIVERT THE ELECTORATE'S ATTENTION FROM HIS GOVERNMENT'S POOR PERFORMANCE IN OFFICE.

5. ON SAME TV PROGRAM, LIBERAL PARTY LEADER JEREMY THORPE AGREED THAT THE PM COULD HAVE HAD A SETTLEMENT WITH THE MINERS IF HE HAD WANTED ONE. HE ALSO LAID LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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CLAIM TO MIDDLE GROUND IN COMING CAMPAIGN, ASSERTING THAT THE LIBERALS ALONE WERE BEHOLDEN TO NEITHER MANAGEMENT NOR LABOR, AND THAT AN INCREASED REPRESENTATION OF LIBERALS IN PARLIAMENT WOULD HELP SAFEGUARD AGAINST EXTREMISTS IN TWO MAJOR PARTIES.

6. THE LABOR PARTY IS EXPECTED TO ISSUE ITS MANIFESTO TODAY. IT WILL BE ESSENTIALLY SAME DOCUMENT AS PRELIMINARY MANIFESTO ISSUED JANUARY 14, 1974 (LONDON 613). CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL MANIFESTOES ARE EXPECTED ON MONDAY.

7. COMMENT: POLITICAL OBSERVERS AND PRESS GENERALLY AGREE THAT PUBLIC OPINION HAS NOT YET BEGUN TO CRYSTALLIZE AND COULD FLUCTUATE WIDELY DURING COURSE OF CAMPAIGN. OUTCOME OF ELECTION IS THEREFORE UNUSUALLY DIFFICULT TO PREDICT. THERE IS ALSO WIDE-SPREAD CONCERN THAT CAMPAIGN ITSELF WILL BE MORE BITTER, UGLY, AND HARDFOUGHT, THAN ANY FOR YEARS, AND THAT ITS EFFECTS WILL BE SOCIALLY DIVISIVE FOR A LONG TIME TO COME.

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Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
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